



Populism, nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: from anti-colonial struggle to authoritarian neoliberalism

Kanishka Goonewardena

To cite this article: Kanishka Goonewardena (2020) Populism, nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: from anti-colonial struggle to authoritarian neoliberalism, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 102:3, 289-304, DOI: [10.1080/04353684.2020.1780146](https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1780146)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2020.1780146>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 08 Jul 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 9261



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 4 [View citing articles](#)



ORIGINAL ARTICLE



OPEN ACCESS



Populism, nationalism and Marxism in Sri Lanka: from anti-colonial struggle to authoritarian neoliberalism

Kanishka Goonewardena

Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

This is a revised version of a presentation to the Vega Symposium on *Resurgent Nationalisms and Populist Politics in the Neoliberal Age*, held at the Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm, in April 2018. It is part of a Special Issue of *Geografiska Annaler, Series B*, which also includes an Introduction by Gillian Hart, articles by Gillian Hart and Tova Höjdestrand based on their contributions to the Symposium, and an edited transcript of a presentation by Manu Goswami. This paper offers a contribution to the critique of 'left populism' – advocated by some influential left intellectuals and politicians as a response to the rise of right-wing populisms around the world – by way of an analysis of the historical evolution of the relationship between Marxist left political forces and majoritarian ethno-nationalist ideology in Sri Lanka. With a historical perspective spanning from anti-colonial struggle in the late-colonial era to the contemporary conjuncture of neoliberalism and populism, it demonstrates how the radical left in Sri Lanka, a credible contender for state power in the decades immediately before and after the independence from the British Empire in 1948, was eclipsed as a viable political force by nationalist forces after the consolidation of an authoritarian-populist form of neoliberalism in 1977. With hindsight, it is argued that this steady downward trajectory of the Sri Lankan Marxist left in the last four decades, in spite of impressive socialist accomplishments from the mid-1930s until the mid-1970s, owes much to its strategic and tactical flirtations with – especially in the face of neoliberalism and nationalism – 'left populism'.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 May 2020
Accepted 5 June 2020

KEYWORDS

Marxism; nationalism;
populism; neoliberalism;
ideology; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

This paper is a revised and expanded version of my presentation at the 2018 VEGA Symposium of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography on 'Resurgent Nationalisms and Populist Politics in the Neoliberal Age'. In my contribution to this symposium, I addressed the key question posed by the Gillian Hart – how can we make sense of the right-wing nationalisms and populist politics rampant around the world today? – by way of an examination of the Sri Lankan experience of these phenomena. My decision to speak on Sri Lanka on this occasion derived from a longstanding commitment to understand political-economic-ideological developments of my country of origin and now intermittent residence with reference to theories of nationalism, populism and fascism; and the resultant realization that some of the historical and political lessons to be drawn from this island, though not widely appreciated beyond its shores, still provide vital ingredients for

CONTACT Kanishka Goonewardena  kanishka.goonewardena@gmail.com

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

broader critical discussions on nationalism and populism – especially of the kind that Hart has so insightfully initiated (Ekers, Kipfer, and Loftus 2020). What follows, therefore, is an attempt to show how Sri Lanka offers a fruitful vantage point – to be considered within a perspective of ‘relational comparison’ as theorized by Hart (2018) – of the vicissitudes of nationalism and radical left politics, from the days of anti-colonial struggle to the present conjuncture of neoliberalism and populism. Especially pertinent in the Sri Lankan case, I argue, is the vexed relationship of avowedly Marxist political forces to ethno-cultural nationalism, particularly in relation to a recurrent question in the current global conjuncture dominated by right-wing populisms: is a ‘left populism’ possible? (Hart 2019; Sotiris 2019; Mouffe 2018).

To begin with, briefly, what makes Sri Lanka instructive with respect to this question? In a nutshell, it is the historical-political trajectory of the Sri Lankan radical left over the last hundred years or so. It should be recalled that Marxist political parties played a leading role in anti-colonial struggle and wielded considerable influence in parliamentary politics as much as the trade union movement in Sri Lanka, both before and after Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was known from Portuguese colonization in 1505 until 1972) became independent from the British Empire in 1948. Their historic achievements extending over five decades beginning in the early 1930s – not only negotiating the splitting of Ceylonese anti-colonial nationalism into majoritarian Sinhala and minoritarian Tamil and Muslim strands following the divide-and-rule strategy of colonial powers in the island, but also pursuing the interests of the workers and peasants in the post-colonial era, with party-political organization and parliamentary agitation leading to landmark reforms on land, labour, industry and social welfare – are all the more remarkable today, in the wake of the decisive defeat of radical left political forces by the onslaught of neoliberal economics and authoritarian politics since the introduction of the so-called ‘open economy’ in Sri Lanka in 1977. The subsequent decades saw the militant intensification of ethnic conflict in the island – in tandem with an authoritarian populist form of neoliberalism – alongside a secular degeneration of left or formerly left forces into ethno-nationalist and cosmopolitan-neoliberal camps. These developments shaped the main contours of the present political landscape of Sri Lanka, framed by discourses of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, Tamil separatism, authoritarian statism and neoliberal economics – where populist forces of majoritarian nationalism have enjoyed unprecedented electoral success, at the expense of the left political parties which were once credible contenders for socialist political power in post-colonial Ceylon and might have been expected to offer today an alternative to the authoritarian-populist status-quo.

While presenting necessary historical background, this paper revolves around the question: how could we understand the rise of ethnocultural nationalism and the decline of radical left forces in Sri Lanka, within a perspective stretching from late-colonial times to the present day and with special reference to the consolidation of neoliberalism by authoritarian-populist means in a liberal-democratic polity? I begin with an anecdotal reflection on recent Islamophobic violence in Sri Lanka, to open up a window into ethnic conflict and the powerful Sinhala-Buddhist ideology (*Jathika Chinthanaya*) that now dominates domestic political discussion. This is followed by an analysis of the so-called constitutional coup attempted in late 2018 by the more nationalist of Sri Lankan political parties to oust the more neoliberal ruling regime, highlighting the inability of liberal democracy to address the manifest contradictions of neoliberal development, which find expression in nationalist-populist form in the absence of effective left alternatives. While tracing the contradictory consolidation of neoliberalism and the attendant escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka as the essential backdrop for this ill-fated ‘constitutional coup’, I then broach the strategic and theoretical question concerning the relationship of the once Marxist left to nationalist ideology, which, especially in the form of *Jathika Chinthanaya*, has effectively advertised itself as an anti-imperialist political force, with appeals to the traditional virtues Sinhala culture and Buddhism.

My investigation of the challenge posed by *Jathika Chinthanaya* to Marxism in Sri Lanka focuses, first, on the work of the leading thinker and writer of the former, who hails from a solidly left political background and has been more than sympathetic to socialism: Gunadasa Amarasekara. Close attention to his most influential writings over the last four decades demonstrates how a critique of

neoliberal imperialism initially formulated in the late 1970s as a plea for a rapprochement between Marxism and nationalism – or a ‘decolonized’ and indigenized socialism – gradually but steadily shifts over time to become by the turn of the millennium a full-blooded rejection of Marxism in favour of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Next, I present an alternative to Amarasekara’s influential claim – that Marxism failed in Sri Lanka because it could not as a political-ideological movement properly ground itself in local Sinhala-Buddhist socio-cultural terrain – by drawing on especially Kumari Jayawardena’s authoritative historical studies on class and ethnicity in Sri Lanka. In so doing, I locate the relationship between Marxism and nationalism within a longer historical time-frame, from late-colonial times through the origins of neoliberalism in Sri Lanka in 1977 to the present. In conclusion, I argue that the fate of the radical left in Sri Lanka is best understood not in terms of a dearth but an excess of nationalism – beginning with an unholy alliance with the national bourgeoisie and a growing over-reliance on electoral politics compromised by coalitions with parties more nationalist than socialist, all of which were overdetermined by persistent ethnic conflict as well as local and global forces profiting from neoliberal uneven development. Sri Lanka in this sense offers an object lesson in what Frantz Fanon (2004) called ‘the pitfalls of national consciousness’ in the age of neoliberal populism – and a cautionary tale against the temptations of ‘left populism’.

2. Nationalism and ethno-nationalism

While drafting an earlier version of this paper for the VEGA Symposium on 24 April 2018, I was confronted with some disconcerting news pertinent to my interest in the triad of populism, nationalism and neoliberalism: reports of attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka carried out by violent gangs self-identified as Sinhala Buddhists, much like those of 2014, which were carried out with apparent support from high offices of the state and noted Buddhist monks in attendance. Images of destroyed Muslim homes and businesses flashed across both Sri Lankan and international media, accompanied by reports of police and military forces failing to protect the victims of violence. Tensions had been brewing between the majority Sinhala community and the Muslim minority, especially since the end of the Sri Lankan state’s war against the militant separatist movement of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam) in May 2009. The latest round of terror directed at Muslims reminded me of the notorious anti-Tamil pogroms of 1977 and 1983, which I – a member of the Sinhala-speaking majority – had witnessed as a teenager in the streets of Colombo.

Especially reminiscent was the deliberate reluctance of the Sri Lankan security forces to protect the ethnic minorities from majoritarian communal violence – the same repressive state apparatus that was quite effectively deployed to discipline critics of neoliberal economic policies pursued by multiple regimes since the United National Party of J. R. Jayewardene assumed power in the 1977 elections, inaugurating an uninterrupted reign to date of neoliberalism accompanied by a state form that Stuart Hall (1979) named ‘authoritarian populism’. But these appalling events also recall a longer history of communal violence in Sri Lanka, which dates back to the notorious anti-Muslim riot of 1915 – on the 100th anniversary of the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom into British hands, amidst early stirrings of a Sinhala Buddhist cultural-nationalist consciousness – and includes the series of subsequent attacks on Tamils in the post-colonial era, most significantly in 1958, 1977 and 1983.

In response to the anti-Muslim attacks of March 2018, a few academics of Sri Lankan origin living abroad – including myself – wrote a letter to *The Island*, a leading Sri Lankan newspaper, condemning both the latest outbreak of communal violence and the failure of the government to deal with it. Our protest was quite liberal and mainstream – not a radical statement at all – in its appeal to the most ordinary standards of ‘law and order’. After briefly acknowledging the history of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka, in which the LTTE also played a striking part, we simply demanded that the government restore normalcy and bring the perpetrators of violence to justice. The very next day, *The Island* carried a swift response to our letter, written by a Sri Lankan entity called the National University Teachers Association (NUTA). They dismissed us ‘foreign academics’ for being biased

and irrelevant, in part because we failed to mention the many injustices suffered by the majority Sri Lankan community of Sinhala Buddhists – at the hands of Tamil terrorists, Muslim merchants and Western imperialists. And NUTA signed off their All Lives Matter-style response with a patriotic injunction to us: ‘stop criticizing Sri Lanka from abroad’ and ‘return home to serve our motherland’!

In spite of its official sounding name, NUTA does not represent university of teachers of Sri Lanka. But, as a small group of staunchly Sinhala-Buddhist academics, they *do* aggressively represent a broad-based *ideology* – the presently hegemonic¹ majoritarian nationalist ideology that emboldened and legitimated those responsible for the recent attacks on Muslims. It is the ideology of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, popularly known in Sinhala as *Jathika Chinthanaya*, which can be translated into English as National Thought or National Ideology. According to its most articulate ideologues, this *National Ideology* must be distinguished from *ethno*-nationalism – which they see as a modern invention imported to Sri Lanka by colonialism, very much against the grain of this island nation’s multi-ethnic and bi-lingual history of communal coexistence, which especially the British undermined with their divide-and-rule policy. On this view, the *nation* of Sri Lanka *included* the Sinhala majority along with Tamil, Muslim and other minority groups, with its Buddhist state forming the backbone of a shared civilization that persisted through at least two thousand years. Not without controversy, this ‘civilizational state’ is understood to be Buddhist by its most influential proponents today because in their eyes even non-Sinhala Buddhists of the country are fundamentally shaped by and indeed, therefore, share the essentially Buddhist values of the said civilization and state (Amarasekara 2016).

The political agents entrusted with this ‘civilizational state’ have certainly not delivered its claims of multiculturalism or indigenous social and ecological justice – any more than have the prime targets of the critique and derision of *Jathika Chinthanaya*: ‘western’ ideologies and agendas now represented locally by a host of NGOs among other associations of the comprador-cosmopolitan classes. Just before persecuting Muslims, the main accomplishment of *Jathika Chinthanaya*’s populism – in the parliament, the media and the street – was the provision of ideological support for the Sri Lankan state’s war against Tamil separatism, especially since the early 1980s, just as the Tamil Tigers assumed undisputed control in the predominantly Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, having effectively liquidated rival Tamil militant groups and ejected Muslims from their jurisdiction, until their own bloody defeat by Sri Lankan military forces in 2009.

It is in the post-war period, after 2009, that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism found in the figure of the Muslim a ‘new’ enemy – albeit one already targeted in the anti-Muslims riots of 1915. From a mainstream liberal-cosmopolitan standpoint espousing human rights, it is easy enough to denounce the mob violence as much as the repressive state apparatuses aligned with majoritarian nationalism in Sri Lanka, of which *Jathika Chinthanaya* is the ideological expression. The more challenging task is to account for the veritable popular appeal of this National Ideology – to critique rather than dismiss it.

3. Populism and democracy

If NUTA’s response to a perfunctory protest against anti-Muslim communal violence gives us a glimpse of the ideological force of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka today, then the nature of its populism may likewise be grasped by way of what has happened there since those riots – before analysing both nationalism and populism in this country in some historical and theoretical perspective, especially with regard to the intensely-debated prospects of ‘left populism’.

Most instructive on populism is the so-called constitutional coup of 26 October 2018, which sent Sri Lanka into an unprecedented juridical-political limbo that grabbed even international media attention.² For the local and global liberal press, it was a deplorable attempt by the President Maithripala Sirisena and ex-President Mahinda Rajapaksa to oust the ruling United National Party (UNP)-led coalition (United National Front, UNF) from power and replace it with a Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led coalition, effectively reversing the results of the parliamentary election of 2015 and restoring the previous regime to parliamentary power.³ *New York Times*, *Washington Post*,

The Guardian and BBC – along with pro-government local media – were understandably alarmed at the prospect of a neoliberal regime aligned with Washington and Brussels being replaced by a more nationalist and China-friendly one, led by populist politicians with mass appeal among the Sinhala majority. The attempted ‘constitutional coup’ – eventually halted in its tracks by a supreme court ruling on 13 December 2018 – was therefore severely denounced by liberal-cosmopolitan critics as ‘anti-democratic’, in spite of widespread popular support for it from the ‘people’. Characteristically elided in such impassioned critiques was the difference – noted by Stefan Kipfer (2016, 312) – between ‘defending liberal, representative democracy and supporting democracy in the original sense, in which the people (demos) run their own affairs’. Although a Sirisena-Rajapaksa government would hardly have approximated ‘democracy in the original sense’ – quite the contrary was to be expected – the liberal and indeed neoliberal reaction to this doomed ‘constitutional coup’ illustrated vividly the classic elitist and anti-populist ‘fear of “the people”, understood as an unsophisticated, irrational and irresponsible mass’ – a ‘fear [that] fuels the very populist anti-elitism it opposes’ (Kipfer 2016, 312).

So it is worth recalling some details of this ‘constitutional coup’ – which seemed to appear out of nowhere on a Friday evening in October 2018 when President Sirisena abruptly removed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and leader of the UNP from political office and appointed in his stead Rajapaksa. Sirisena himself had defeated Rajapaksa in the last presidential election on January 8, 2015, having defected in late 2014 from a senior position in Rajapaksa’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) regime to become the surprise but successful candidate of the UNP-led United National Front (UNF) opposition. SLPP was formed by Rajapaksa and his party loyalists in 2015, after Sirisena claimed SLFP leadership in the wake of the presidential and parliamentary elections of the same year, with support from a fraction of the membership that chose not to join the new party formed by the former president. Historically, the UNP has been the party of the ruling rentier class taking their cues from London and Washington, from D. S. Senanayaka, the first prime minister of Ceylon after independence from Britain in 1948, to Ranil Wickremesinghe, the prime minister of the UNF regime of 2015; whereas the SLFP was founded in 1956 by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike as a more nationalist and social-democratic – as well as ‘left populist’ – alternative to the UNP, which also has indulged in its fair share of populism including appeals to nationalism in the strategic field of electoral politics.⁴ Since the ‘authoritarian populist’ introduction of neoliberalism in 1977, however, the difference between the UNP and the SLFP has become more symbolic than substantive on economic policy, notwithstanding the latter’s closer ties to China – although in the neoliberal era, in particular, the former, the favoured party of the western ‘international community’, has usually lagged behind the latter in terms of majoritarian nationalist credentials.

4. Good and bad governance

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime won the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2015 with an assurance of ‘good governance’, thanks to the nepotistic record of the Rajapaksa governments of 2005–2010 and especially 2010–2015, which rendered the nationalist euphoria of winning the war against the LTTE in 2009 an insufficient basis for lasting legitimacy, particularly after disappointing Tamil political aspirations in the post-war period while alienating Muslims with gratuitous Sinhala-Buddhist violence. Yet the promise of UNP-led ‘good governance’ almost instantaneously turned out to be a spectacular fraud, on account of the notorious Bond Scam⁵ amidst other malpractices of the new government. As the ‘constitutional coup’ was in progress, much of the opposition to the improvised Sirisena-Rajapaksa plot to dissolve parliament and hold elections ahead of schedule found expression in ethico-juridical terms. These two politicians were depicted by adherents of the *status quo ante* as conniving architects of an illegitimate ‘constitutional coup’ – lumpen populists with no regard for sacrosanct liberal institutions of ‘good governance’, such as those embodied in the 2015 Nineteenth Amendment to the constitution that emasculated the office of the president, ostensibly to

make governance more democratic by according more power to the prime minister and a cabinet of ministers. The ironically elitist – and real – intent of the authors of the latter was to fully abolish the executive presidency, itself a creation of ‘authoritarian populist’ neoliberalism pioneered in Sri Lanka by J. R. Jayewardene in 1977, in order to present Wickremesinghe with the opportunity of becoming the head of state in the next election by virtue of being the leader of UNP, without having to be directly elected by the people.

It was surely a populist move on Sirisena’s part, too, to align himself again with what appeared to be still the most popular politician in the country. Even after electoral defeat in 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa remains a figure like Vladimir Putin or Narendra Modi in his unsurpassed ability to mobilize a ‘nationalist-popular’ will in the ethnically divided theatre of Sri Lankan politics – with deep support as well from the labouring classes, especially in the smaller towns and villages, which have suffered most from Wickremesinghe’s austerity measures. This was amply demonstrated in the island-wide local government election on February 10, 2018, when Rajapaksa’s SLPP coalition scored a landslide victory, capturing power in 231 of 340 local authorities, reducing the UNP-led coalition’s share to 34. Though ridiculed as ‘village idiots’ by Colombo liberal elites, both Sirisena and Rajapaksa with their seasoned provincial sensibilities knew better than them that populist also means popular – and democratic in a representative-parliamentary sense. Hence the conviction with which they presented their (substantively questionable) case to the ‘people’ – to place the fate of the country in the hands of fifteen million voters rather than with 225 overvalued MPs, a thin majority of whom were still alleged to be propping up a massively delegitimated government, at an unwarranted cost to the country.

While the Sirisena-Rajapaksa rhetoric here could well bear the name ‘provincializing Colombo’, the decisive political question of the hour pitted democracy against liberalism. Due respect for liberal political-judicial institutions held in high esteem by Colomboans connected to the ‘international community’ was in this case countered by a duo of peasant stock with a direct appeal to the popular will of the people. Though hardly unanimous, the general feeling in the streets disgusted with career politicians on all sides seemed largely to favour an election as the best way out of the mess. In contrast, the liberal opposition to the populist Sirisena-Rajapaksa initiative pinned all hopes on the judiciary, which eventually ruled in its favour on December 13, 2018, forcing Rajapaksa’s resignation and Wickremesinghe’s return as prime minister – until the parliamentary election due in 2020. In this context, there is irony in the ‘democratic’ claims of those anti-populist authors of the Nineteenth Amendment who threw their support behind Wickremesinghe as much as against the strategically ill-advised Sirisena-Rajapaksa plan. After being surprised by local government election results, in the wake of the Bond Scam and other betrayals, the Wickremesinghe-led UNF took diligent care to postpone indefinitely the overdue provincial council elections on the basis of a procedural pretext, undermining not only the letter and spirit of democracy, but also the proper functioning of the key state institution entrusted to devolve political power to the provinces and especially ethnic minorities. It was the respected retired civil servant Jolly Somasundram (2019) who best summed up the liberal logic that carried the day: ‘No elections: democracy is saved’.

5. Neoliberalism and authoritarian communalism

Wickremesinghe’s fear of elections and Sirisena’s eagerness for them in league with Rajapaksa – this contradiction contains the key to the populist temptation with which Sri Lanka’s present political-economic-ideological landscape is pregnant. For a rapid sketch, it is important to recall that the recent constitutional and other political disputes go back to 1978, when Wickremesinghe’s uncle, then Prime Minister Junius Richard Jayewardene, replaced the Westminster-style republican Sri Lankan constitution of 1972 with one centred on an executive president, a year after his electoral victory with a 5/6th parliamentary majority in 1977, by combining selected features of the French, German, and US models. The concentration of executive power in the president’s office, away from parliament, was clearly self-serving to the UNP strongman, whose historical accomplishment was

the introduction of neoliberal economics to Sri Lanka and squashing left opposition by any means necessary.

This project, as has been the case elsewhere, needed not democracy but ‘political will’, which President Jayewardene supplied in abundance as he ruled with an iron fist by invoking the infamous Prevention of Terrorism Act. The PTA also proved handy in attending to a couple of other matters: the Tamil Tigers fighting for a separate state carved out of the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka; and the second insurrection of the People’s Liberation Front (JVP) in the South that resulted in fifty thousand to eighty thousand extra-judicial killings, mostly by the state. Given the ‘Marxist’ label attached to the JVP militants, no audible outcry about their liquidation emerged from the ‘international community’ concerned with human rights. Instead, Jayewardene was feted in Washington by Ronald Reagan and praised as an example for the rest of the Cold War world; a suitably self-orientalized Yankee Dickie⁶ returned the favour by gifting the Gipper a Sri Lankan baby elephant on the White House lawn.

Nor did the potent new office of the executive president – to which prominent Marxists such as Colvin R. de Silva vehemently objected in the 1970s – draw any memorable ire from liberal Colomboans, mostly allied with Jayewardene and his political progenies, until it was occupied in 1994 by the more nominally social-democratic and avowedly majoritarian-nationalist SLFP, after seventeen years of UNP rule marked by what Edmund Burke would have called Terror. But the uneven development of neoliberalism in Sri Lanka was accompanied by an escalation of virulent nationalism, both of the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority, which drastically reduced the scope for political solutions to Sri Lanka’s increasingly violent ethnic conflict.⁷ Under these circumstances, no Sri Lankan president since 1978 from either of the two main national parties seriously contemplated abolishing the executive presidency, least of all Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose Eighteenth Amendment to the constitution in 2010 got rid of the two-term limit on the most powerful office of the country – before it was reintroduced by the ‘good governance’ regime of 2015, forestalling Rajapaksa’s return to executive power. To be sure, it was he who deployed its full force more effectively than anyone else, to eliminate the LTTE in 2009, amid allegations of alarming numbers of Tamil civilian deaths in the final stages of war, subsequently reported to be in the region of forty thousand or more according to UN and other incriminating – and disputed – estimates. Influential efforts have been made to hold accountable those responsible for such deaths and disappearances, both internationally and in Sri Lanka, with support from sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. These efforts, however, played only a marginal role in Rajapaksa’s surprise defeat in the 2015 presidential election, after he had won a second term in 2010 by easily prevailing over the challenge mounted by his former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, who was recruited to run as the common opposition candidate with UNP blessings because Wickremesinghe knew he had no chance.

Having won the war against the LTTE, the Rajapaksa regime shot itself in the foot. Drenched with unprecedented popularity, and with a political opposition in tatters, it squandered the opportunity to reach an agreeable political settlement with minority communities. Instead of sublating majoritarian nationalism, moreover, it encouraged the most deplorable elements of extreme Sinhala-Buddhist ideology such as the Bodu Bala Sena⁸ to run riot – adding to its postwar repertoire a series of Islamophobic pogroms against the Muslim community. Enamored with modernization, the Rajapaksas viewed the ethnic problem not as political but economic – one that could be solved by development, on the basis of large-scale infrastructure projects involving highways, airports, ports and Haussmannian urban planning. While all that no doubt buttressed GDP growth, thanks in part to special contributions from China, the expected trickle-down to the masses fell well below expectations, especially in the North and the East, amid impatient cries of corruption – amplified by the regime’s nepotistic surplus.

It was not radically different from previous UNP governments in handling dissenting views, but compared to Jayewardene’s tactics in the pre-Internet era of two TV channels, the Rajapaksa regime’s efforts to control public opinion had far more limited – and negative – effect. With news of media repression appearing all over the media, the objective conditions and the subjective timing for

Rajapaksa's defeat by Sirisena on January 8, 2015, were set mostly by the president himself and his astrologer. So it was Rajapaksa who dictated the script for the 'good governance' manifesto of Sirisena's election campaign orchestrated by the UNP, unwittingly enabling Wickremesinghe to plot his own 'constitutional coup' to arrogate power to his own office by way of the Nineteenth Amendment while branding it as an exercise in democracy. The electoral calculus of Sirisena's presidential campaign was straightforward: to win a sufficient minority of the disaffected Sinhala majority vote, together with virtually the entire minority vote comprehensively alienated by the Rajapaksa regime. It worked, arithmetically. Logically, however, astounding political amnesia was required to think that Wickremesinghe and his cabal would deliver on their promise of 'good governance', given their political track record. It is unlikely that a politician of Sirisena's experience sincerely believed the liberal-democratic 'good governance' discourse to begin with; it is more likely that he saw in it the serendipitous opportunity for presidency that was unlikely to arise for him from within the nepotistic Rajapaksa party.

6. Left political strategy

From a left perspective, the dangers of the present conjuncture in Sri Lanka are clear enough. These in essence are not different from those of other countries with failed neoliberal projects, and ripe with favourable conditions for right-wing and xenophobic political-ideological forces. The inability of political liberalism and economic neoliberalism to address them in Sri Lanka is also overdetermined by ethnic conflict and attendant nationalisms. Surveying this situation with characteristic élan, Dayan Jayatilaka, Sri Lanka's former ambassador in Moscow and admirer of both Rajapaksa and Putin, prescribes as the appropriate response to it a 'left populism', with a grateful nod to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's appropriation of Antonio Gramsci in their works on 'radical democracy' and populism.⁹ How this is to be distinguished from the all too prevalent nationalist-populism of his political role models including the former President Ranasinghe Premadasa of the UNP, however, awaits persuasive elaboration – along with sober reflection on the recent trajectories of 'left-populism' in Laclau's home region of Latin America.

Approaching the same neoliberal dead-end from a quite different perspective, Gunadasa Amarasekara (2016), the most able advocate of *Jathika Chinthanaya* in Sri Lanka, has advanced the notion of a 'civilizational state' – the symbiosis of an 'ethical life' and a state form – as the necessary solution, adopting the key terms of his advocacy of Sinhala Buddhism from Samuel Huntington and Martin Jacques rather than Hegel. In *Civilizational State and Socialist Society*, the Marxist political-economist Sumanasiri Liyanage (2017) argues that Amarasekara's conception could usefully be historicized and actualized from a left standpoint by way of dialectical critique, in alignment with Antonio Gramsci's theorization of the 'integral state' as an articulation of political society with civil society. While this contention, too, needs to be properly differentiated from the hegemonic claims of majoritarian nationalism, theoretical-political debates inviting us to reread Gramsci offer a refreshing improvement over the Colomboan discourse of dead but dominant liberalism.

Better with than without Gramsci, then, the crimes of cosmopolitan Colombo may be most rewardingly viewed from the provincial Tamil capital of Jaffna. Especially pertinent in the context of what Jayatilaka announced on Facebook as 'our October Revolution' – before conceding that 'we've lost the battle but won the war' – are Ahilan Kadirgamar's (2018) acute reflections from the North on the 2018 local government election. In a close reading of election campaigns and results of a multitude of parties and independent groups, he underlines the losses recorded in February 2018 by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – more adept at exchanging high-level favours with the UNP in parliament than connecting to Northern grassroots – and the corresponding ascent of two opposed tendencies. One is the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF), with its 'virulent Tamil nationalist politics' mirroring extremist Southern tendencies and even welcoming them, as nothing nourishes one suicidal ethno-nationalism more dependably than another. The other has emerged from 'pockets of progressive politics which have eschewed narrow Tamil nationalism', by engaging

in impressive anti-caste mobilizations, social development initiatives, and projects of economic democracy – under the auspices of Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and some who have broken away from it, the Social Democratic Party of Tamils (SDPT), the New Democratic Marxist Leninist Party (NDMLP), and a few independent groups. In their theoretical visions beyond ethno-nationalism, democratic organizational efforts, and local-electoral successes – matching or exceeding the much older TNA in several electorates – Kadirgamar finds 'hope to re-chart Tamil politics'. What's left of the left in the South too will surely do well to follow the example of these comrades – and the refreshing radicalism of Tamil estate workers in the plantation sector of the Hill Country – rather than old pyramids of patronage maintained by the political *status quo* entrenched in communal ideology.

While fully registering the optimism offered by Kadirgamar in circumstances dominated by ethno-nationalist and neoliberal forces, however, it should also be acknowledged that his political allies are still a small minority in a political landscape that has malnourished socialism. Here, students of Sri Lankan political history cannot fail to notice – amidst such reflections on left political activism and strategy – the seemingly inexorable elimination of socialism as a parliamentary political force during the course of the neoliberal counter-revolution inaugurated in 1977, with the ominous watchwords of President Jayewardene: 'open economy' and 'righteous society'. Marxist parties, which played a prominent role in politics both inside and outside the state legislature in late colonial and early post-colonial decades, are now virtually extinct. The remainders of Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and the Communist Party (CP) – in unison credible contenders for un-alloyed socialist state power as late as the early 1960s – have been reduced to demeaning alliances with the SLFP/SLPP, with the Sinhala-Buddhist Bandaranaike and Rajapaksa dynasties at the helm, and mostly lip service to social-democracy in the neoliberal era after UNP rule from 1977 to 1994. With the betrayals of neoliberal 'good governance' and ethno-national socialism, progressive voters are scrambling for choice in the forthcoming parliamentary and provincial council elections; and in the last presidential election, some members of the Sri Lankan left intelligentsia with faded if not erstwhile Marxist credentials were left to advocate (in vain) a vote for the lesser evil – represented by the UNP candidate, Sajith Premadasa, the son of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the successor to President Jayewardene and the finest embodiment of populist-nationalist neoliberalism in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ In this conjuncture, the question concerning 'left populism' in Sri Lanka must be preceded by another question: how did the Marxist left, which once appealed powerfully to the masses and struck fear in the ruling classes, end up too soon in the dustbin of political history?

7. Jathika Chinthanaya and Marxism

Let us consider, then, two contrasting perspectives on the misfortunes of the left in Sri Lanka. First: the critique of Marxism advanced by *Jathika Chinthanaya* – which echoes the thought of various national-populist reactions to Marxism in other non-Western countries articulated during the Cold War, exemplified by such figures as Ali Shariati in Iran, who have engaged and even appropriated Marxism only to reject it in the end as a 'western' import ultimately antithetical to anti-colonial struggle. The second perspective begins below (section 9), with reference to eminent Sri Lankan historian Kumari Jayawardena's work.

The first style of thought has been present in Sri Lanka with varying degrees of sophistication since Marxist politics established itself as a formidable force there in the early 1930s, but their most developed forms emerged in the wake of 1977 – after the election of J. R. Jayewardene's right-wing UNP regime, which unleashed the so-called 'open economy' on the island, even before the term neoliberalism had entered global *lingua franca*. This political-economic-cultural watershed of 1977 also coincided with the final defeat of the Marxist left as a parliamentary force of any consequence and the deepening of economic disparities as well as ethnic conflict – as demonstrated by the spectacular rise of extra-parliamentary militant forces in the 1980s, especially the People's

Liberation Front (JVP)¹¹ in the Sinhala dominated areas and the Tamil Tigers in the north and east, along with an alarming escalation of state repression. The unprecedentedly repressive force of the state was first used to crush resistance to the neoliberalization, mostly notably in the violent break-up of the island-wide general strike of 1980, the last political act of the 'old' Marxist left, anticipating what Reagan did to air traffic controllers in 1982 and Thatcher to the miners in 1984. These developments were also accompanied by what we may call – following Henri Lefebvre and Frankfurt School critics – a radical transformation of everyday life on the island, especially in southern cities, where urban form was rapidly overwhelmed by commodity form, as a conspicuous influx of television, private cars and luxury goods began advertising the daydream of capitalist development promised by the 'open economy' – especially to the subaltern classes most unlikely to attain it.

The progressive intelligentsia in Sri Lanka responded in spirited fashion to this new conjuncture: neoliberal uneven development in the economic domain, authoritarian statism in the political sphere and western imperialism in the cultural realm. They did so with soul-searching reflections on the onslaught of the culture of commodities, the fate of Marxism and the prospects of humane social development. A groundbreaking intervention here was a book published in 1980 entitled *Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?* by Gunadasa Amarasekara (1980), the leading contemporary Sinhala novelist and public intellectual in Sri Lanka. According to the author's own words, this highly influential work pursued two main objectives. The first was to underline the actuality of the thought of the founding father of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, Dharmapala (1864-1933), who in Amarasekara's considered opinion was the *only* significant anti-colonial thinker of Ceylon who properly understood Sinhala-Buddhist traditional culture of the island as an indispensable resource for its anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial development. The second intent of the book was to promote the 'cohabitation' between the Sinhala-Buddhist National Ideology discerned by Dharmapala and the Marxist political movement of Sri Lanka.

8. Country and city

Eight years later, Amarasekara (1988) published another landmark text: *In the Heart of Darkness I See Rays of Dawn*. It was in this book that he spelled out the term *Jathika Chinthanaya* (National Ideology) as the necessary cultural-ideological response to the neoliberal political-economic transformation of the country, at a time when the Sri Lankan state was embattled in a war with Tamil Tigers on one side and the JVP on the other, while the comprador bourgeoisie was advancing the neoliberal 'open economy' wherever it could, according to the wishes of the Washington Consensus. Here Amarasekara speaks glowingly of a Buddhist 'civilizational state' based on agrarian infrastructure and social relations reminiscent of Marx's sketch of the Asiatic mode of production, one that governed Sri Lanka from the 5th century BCE until European colonization. Its salient socio-economic features included communal ownership, mutual aid and caring for nature. As such, this 'civilizational state' was the ideal political shell for Buddhist ethical values, just as for Lenin, the liberal-democratic state provided the ideal political shell for the capitalist economy. Historically, this state was pioneered by the legendary Buddhist emperor Asoka in India – according to Amarasekara – before it took root and flourished in the nourishing Sri Lankan soil.

In *National Ideology and National Economy* written in 1993, Amarasekara developed some implications of his earlier works – in response to the challenge issued by President Premadasa to critics of neoliberalism – to propose an alternative. 'Before choosing a path of development', Amarasekara (1993, 14) wrote, 'we must have a clear understanding of its objectives and goals. ... What is the knowledge that gives us this understanding? This knowledge is contained within nothing else but in our national culture; to be more precise, within the *Jathika Chinthanaya* which can be considered both the expression and the vehicle of that culture'. But how can we build an economy *today* that is true to the values of this National Ideology? According to Amarasekara (1993, 14), 'we must find, in the present, some basic outlines ... of a national economy that is hidden from us and has thus far failed to command our due attention'. To this end, we are urged to follow the example of

Dharmapala, who is said to have discovered *Jathika Chinthanaya* not from a scholastic study of history or politics, but by virtue of his legendary travels through poor villages of British Ceylon as a 22-year-old, four decades after Friedrich Engels wrote at a similar age *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, while the Narodniks in Russia were contemplating the *obshchina* (village commune) as a springboard to socialism:¹²

In these journeys, there is no doubt that Dharmapala saw something more important than the poverty of the villagers. That important thing was the residual—but live—form of our national economy still found in our villages: the village agricultural economy that nourishes village life. So it must be clear to you that our *Jathika Chinthanaya* is revealed not by some dead past or lost glory, but rather on the basis of a dynamic present, a live socio-economy. This village-based agricultural economy that was the backbone of our *Jathika Chinthanaya* must be termed our national economy. (Amarasekara 1993, 24)

Unmistakable here is the affective valorization of the countryside against the city in the discourse of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. It is a telling ideological response to the uneven development of capitalism at various spatial scales, aptly captured by the artists who designed the covers of Amarasekara's recent books. Two key elements are prominent in these illustrations: the dagoba of the Buddhist temple representing 'civilization'; and the irrigation tank, the iconic infrastructural element of the Asiatic mode of production, representing the 'state'. These images adding up to the 'civilizational state' reveal the spatial dimension of *Jathika Chinthanaya*, especially the unequal relation between city and country in the development of capitalism, which Raymond Williams (1973, 279–288) theorized as a 'model' for imperialism in *The Country and the City*. To formulate a critical perspective on the spatiality of National Ideology, we can likewise draw creatively from the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre and the anticolonial critic Fanon – as Stefan Kipfer has suggested in his illuminating work on relationship between urbanization and colonization, as well as insightful reflections on the spatial sensibilities of Gramsci in his essay on the Southern Question and other writings.¹³

In his book on Dharmapala and Marxism, Amarasekara identified the two forces he thought were capable of resisting neoliberalism and offering an alternative: Buddhism and Marxism. In 1980, at onset of neoliberalism in Sri Lanka, he first sought a synthesis of the two as the desired path of national development. In fact, in *Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?* he argued eloquently that Buddhism and Marxism *needed* each other to be politically effective in the Sri Lankan context, even *criticizing* Dharmapala's strategic failure to embrace the Marxist movement in order to actualize the vision of his Buddhist socialism. In the 1992 preface to the second edition of this book, however, Amarasekara struck a radically different note, confessing that he was misguided in his original optimism concerning an alliance of National Ideology and Marxism, because of an inadequate understanding of both. In the latest preface of 2014, he goes the full distance, claiming that Sinhala Buddhist National Ideology is the *only* viable political option for Sri Lanka. The artists are again helpful, when we compare the covers of the first and latest editions of this book. In the first publication, the visage of Marx loomed larger than that of Dharmapala; in the latest edition, it is Dharmapala alone who occupies centre stage, with the demeanor of a sagely guide to the contradiction between traditional culture and capitalist modernity. Missing from *this* picture is Marx (Figure 1).

9. Colonialism and anti-colonialism¹⁴

Amarasekara's final verdict is unequivocal: Marxism failed in Sri Lanka because it could not root itself in native soil, which already had been rhizomatically occupied by Buddhism. A much different judgment on the fate of Marxist politics in Sri Lanka emerges, however, from the work of Kumari Jayawardena, the leading scholar of class, gender and ethnicity in the country. Her perspective on the difficult relationship between Marxism and nationalism in Sri Lanka takes us back to the late colonial era of Ceylon under British rule, because it was then that the first stirrings of *Jathika Chinthanaya* became politically influential, largely as a response to the colonial divide-and-rule policy, which was denounced especially by residual and emergent Sinhala elites aspiring for political and

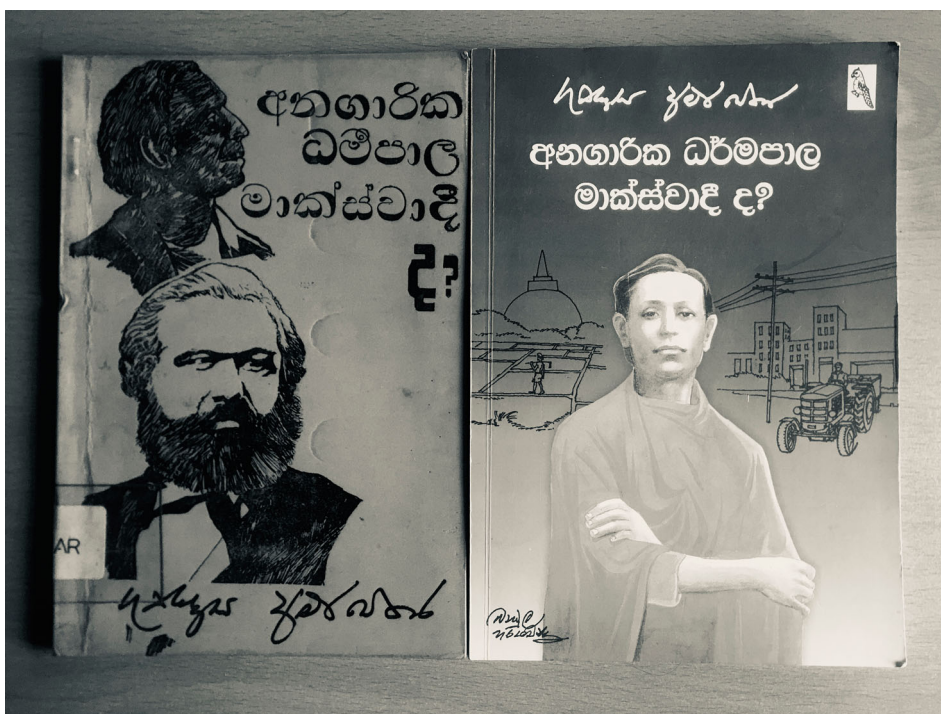


Figure 1. [Image]: Front covers of Gunadasa Amarasekara's ([1980] 2014) *Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?* – left: first edition, 1980; right, third edition, 2014.

economic power, who evidently felt that the colonial dispensation was unjustly favouring minorities. As Ambalavanar Sivanandan notes in his 'case study' of Sri Lanka:

When the British left Ceylon in 1948, the lines of communal conflict had already been drawn. One hundred and fifty years of British rule had brought together three different social formations under one central administration for purposes of economic exploitation; but for purposes of political control, the colonial government had reinforced the communal divisions that ran like a seam around those social formations. It divided in order to rule what it integrated in order to exploit. (Sivanandan 1990, 199)

The leading forms of opposition to British colonialism in Ceylon were thus compromised from the outset by strategically accentuated ethnic divisions within the Crown Colony of Ceylon. Instead of becoming a united political force, anti-colonial aspirations in Ceylon were mostly channeled through *two* main *ethno*-nationalist streams – Sinhala and Tamil. Each tended to view the other, within the island and in the sub-continental geo-political context, more as rivals than allies, with disastrous post-colonial consequences that are still unfolding.

The signal exception to such *ethno*-nationalist anti-colonial politics came principally from socialist mobilizations in Ceylon, led by the Marxist political party LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party),¹⁵ founded in 1935 and renowned for its Trotskyist socialist internationalism; and also from the Communist Party (CP), a pro-Moscow breakaway from the LSSP founded in 1943, which has been more attuned to the Comintern than the Fourth International. Both were at the forefront of anti-imperialist struggles in Ceylon and exercised formidable influence in electoral politics as well, with charismatic Marxist representatives in the State Council of Ceylon since 1931 and later in successive post-colonial parliaments. In the latter, the LSSP, CP and the MEP (People's United Front founded in 1959 by former members of the LSSP) played a decisive role in many of the socialist or social-democratic achievements at the level of state policy – on land reform, public services, industrialization, health and education – well into the mid 1970s, until their debilitating defeat by right-wing,

neoliberal and populist forces orchestrated by the United National Party (UNP) in the 1977 election, from which neither the parties of this 'old left' nor the oppressed classes they once championed have yet recovered.

But this socialist-internationalist thrust of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism in Sri Lanka, a popular though not populist political force from late-colonial times to the heyday of *tiers-mondiste* politics of the non-aligned world, was always formed in internal opposition to and within the context of a broader cultural nationalism that drew its inspiration from an indigenous Sinhala and Buddhist identity, fostered by colonialism to be sure, but also imagined by visionaries like Dharmapala as the authentic antidote to western colonialism and culture. Here the discursive space of anti-colonial politics was effectively grounded on the seemingly unifying terrain of culture, rather than that of contested social, political and economic relations – which furnished the base for the integral cultural critiques of Gramsci as well as Fanon. Nonetheless, in his spiritual-materialist appreciation of the discourse of nationalism in Indian anti-colonialism, Partha Chatterjee hazards the speculation that this kind of cultural-nationalism was a general feature of anti-colonialism:

Anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains, the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside', of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner' domain bearing the 'essential' marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa. (Chatterjee 1993, 6)

10. Underdevelopment and nationalism

Yet the spiritual is material – these do not separate like oil and water. Their dialectical rather than inside-outside relationship in the case of Sri Lanka, moreover, is different from that of India, by virtue of the crucial absence of a national bourgeoisie in the former in the context of anti-colonial struggle, which retarded not only the development of capitalism in the island nation, but also the objective conditions necessary for a unified nationalist movement opposed to imperialism and capable of transcending communal divisions. On this point, Sri Lanka's leading Marxist political economist S. B. D. de Silva (1982) and Sivanandan concur with Kumari Jayawardena – while also arguing that the plantation economy introduced to Ceylon by the British was pre-capitalist rather than capitalist, incapable of promoting industry or of producing a proletariat as theorized by Marx and Engels.¹⁶ It is against the backdrop of these circumstances – marked by the essentially petty bourgeois character of the early stages of the labour movement in Ceylon under the tutelage of A. E. Goonesinghe – that the achievements of the LSSP and CP from the early 1930s to the mid-1960s appear especially impressive. Not only did they radicalize working-class militancy, effectively taking over the leadership of the labour movement from the renegade Goonesinghe during the historic strike at the Wellawatta Spinning and Weaving Mills in 1933, but they also championed the cause of Indian Tamil plantation workers and other immigrant workers very much against the grain of ascendant Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist sentiment. In the post-colonial era, as the latter gathered unprecedented cultural-political momentum on the back of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's 1956 government making Sinhala the official state language within a day of its election as promised – in a populist offering to Sinhala people hitherto marginalized by political and economic privileges reserved for English speaking elites of the country – the LSSP and CP stood for language parity, proposing that *both* Sinhala *and* Tamil be made official languages. LSSP stalwart Colvin. R. de Silva's unheeded warning then on the issue of national languages (*swabhasha*) was prophetic: 'Two languages, one nation – one language, two nations' (Muttiah and Wanasinghe 2005).

On the subsequent decline and degeneration of this Marxist left in Sri Lanka, Jayawardena's (1987) interpretation is instructive as it is multidimensional, involving due consideration of both local and global factors. In its international orientation, the Marxist left strategy in Sri Lanka has for too long been located somewhere between Comintern and Eurocommunist thinking, overly respectful of the national bourgeoisie (such as it was) in anti-imperialist matters and fully committed to the parliamentary rather road to socialism, rather than a strategy of dual power. This parliamentarism, according to Jayawardena, attached an inflated value to electoral success, especially in the challenging post-1956 context of Sinhala-Buddhist cultural-political renaissance, which tempted if not forced these Marxist parties into alliances with the more social-democratic of the two main national parties, the SLFP, which owed much of its popularity to majoritarian cultural nationalism. The record of the LSSP and CP in coalition governments headed by the SLFP in 1960–1965 and 1970–1977 – even with the power of the finance ministry from 1970–1975 – proved on the whole detrimental to their Marxist ambitions. The same Jolly Somasundram quoted earlier once sardonically noted with reference to LSSP's Trotskyism: 'they did not believe in socialism in one country, but believed in socialism in one ministry'.¹⁷ On the ethnic question in particular, the drift into coalitions with a national bourgeois party governed by petty bourgeois ideology pushed the LSSP and CP into ever more dubious compromises.

In Jayawardena's historical perspective, then, the electoral debacle of 1977 appears only as a last nail in the 'old left' coffin – prepared in advance by the 'left populist' errors of the LSSP and CP. Following the relentless neoliberal onslaught after 1977 – and by the time the SLFP eventually competed with UNP's 'open economy' and 'righteous society' by ratcheting up its nationalism and muting its social democracy – the 'old left' had already lost its not only its Marxist credentials but also its *raison d'être*. Pace Amarasekara (1980), the error of the 'old left' consisted not in inadequate nationalism, but too much of it – as documented by Jayawardena and explicitly acknowledge in a belated self-critique of the CP:

In order to restore confidence among the national minorities, our Party should also make known its self-critical acceptance of certain errors and shortcomings in its work in this field. In particular, we would accept our failure to fight consistently and energetically against the discriminations that the minority communities experience in their daily lives and our failure to speak up against the Police and Army excesses in the North. ... The under-estimation of the important role of plantation labour of Indian origin and the general neglect of both political and trade union work among them is another expression of the rightist political opportunism on the national minorities question during this period.¹⁸

11. Pitfalls of 'Left Populism'

Late-colonial and post-colonial Sri Lanka indeed offers a fine case study of what Frantz Fanon (2004) famously called 'the pitfalls of national consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here he warned prophetically that national consciousness alone could not achieve the emancipatory objectives of anti-colonial struggle, in the absence of a socialist transformation of social relations both within and beyond the post-colony. If nationalism without socialism represented a grave danger for Fanon, as manifested in the counter-revolutionary politics of the comprador bourgeoisie class of former colonies, he also asserted – with theorists of 'negritude' such as Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire – the inability of a purely abstract-universalist conception of socialism to serve as the *immediate* political-ideological counter to colonialism and imperialism. Negritude was denounced as a petty-bourgeois deviation – even reverse racism – by some text-book Marxists of the European left. Jean-Paul Sartre (2001), however, defended Fanon and kindred spirits for their advocacy of negritude as an essential ingredient in the historical dialectic of anti-colonialism striving for socialist universalism. In pop-Hegelian language: there was first the *thesis* of European colonialism and imperialism; and second, the *anti-thesis* of pan-African negritude or pan-Arab conceptions of national consciousness. But Fanon also envisioned a universal moment of *synthesis*: a socialist and internationalist humanism of tricontinental rather than exclusively European provenance, in

precise opposition to the forgery of European liberal humanism fatally tainted by colonialism and neocolonialism. Symptomatically lacking in much postcolonial politics as well as postcolonial theory is this third synthetic moment of the anti-colonial dialectic, without which it could not become also anti-imperialist, let alone do justice to the socialist-universal aspiration of revolutionary national liberation movements.¹⁹ Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka is no exception to this trend, that is, the failure to negotiate the relationship between nationalism and socialism in a universally emancipatory direction. The Marxist movement of the country also suffered severely from the same problem, as it floundered in the face of nationalism, especially in the time of neoliberalism and populism, by following ‘*the people*’ rather than struggling on the side of subaltern *classes* – as we have been urged to do by Gramsci.

Notes

1. Among the Sinhala people, who make up approximately 75% of the Sri Lankan population. According to the 2012 census, Sri Lankan Tamils now account for 11.1%; Indian Tamils brought over to work in the plantations in the British colonial era 4.1%; and the Muslims or Moors, mostly descendants of Arab traders who settled in the island, 9.1%.
2. For a journalistic account of this fiasco, see Goonewardena (2019).
3. Whereas *peramuna* is usually translated as front, *podujana* means common (*podu*) people (*jana*): in Sinhala, the very name of the political party *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* (SLPP) has a populist ring to it, resonant with the definition of populism resting on the notion of ‘people’ proposed by, among others, Ernesto Laclau (2005).
4. For a fine overview of Sri Lankan political economy critical of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, see Ambalavanar Sivanandan (1990, 199–250).
5. This refers to the fraudulent sale of sovereign bonds—incriminating the Governor of the Central Bank, close associate and appointee of Prime Minister Wickremasinghe, along with senior ministers and their relatives—which is estimated to have robbed Sri Lankan taxpayers over \$11 million.
6. Affectionate nick-name for J. R. Jayewardene.
7. On the contribution of neoliberalism to ethnic conflict in the late 70s, see Newton Gunasinghe (1996, 183–203).
8. An ultra Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist group, led by the Venerable Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara,
9. Especially Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) and Laclau (2005); Jayatilleka’s erudite political commentaries are regularly featured in his Facebook page and on the websites of Sri Lankan newspapers such as *Financial Times* and *Colombo Telegraph*.
10. See, for example, Rajan Philips (2019); the most spectacular among them was Jayatilleka, the ‘Marxist’ admirer and influential associate of two former presidents: Mahinda Rajapaksa (SLFP) and Ranasinghe Premadasa (UNP).
11. *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) was founded in 1965 after a split from Ceylon Communist Party (Peking Wing), itself a breakaway from the pro-Moscow Communist Party, and attempted two unsuccessful insurrections in 1971 and 1987–1989.
12. Gunadasa Amarasekara (1993, 23). On the debates on the ‘village commune’ in Russia, especially the famous exchange on this matter between Vera Zasulich and Marx, see Shanin (1983).
13. See Kipfer and Goonewardena (2013, 76–116) and Kipfer (2013, 83–103). Amarasekara’s own political-ideological trajectory would seem to suggest that the revolutionary potential of the Sri Lankan ‘village community’—which recalls Russian populist debates and the *obshchina* discussion involving Zasulich and Marx—was eventually extinguished by its exclusive possession by *Jathika Chinthanaya*.
14. For sections 9 and 10, I have relied especially on Jayawardena (2017) and my familiarity with her other works on class, ethnicity and gender in Sri Lanka.
15. The literal English translation—Lanka Equal Society Party—is rarely if ever used in Sri Lanka.
16. S. B. D. de Silva (1982). De Silva’s conception of capitalism conforms to the model provided by England, including industrial revolution as much as bourgeois revolution, seemingly excluding from it colonized and underdeveloped peripheries of the capitalist world system.
17. Remark made at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo.
18. Communist Party (1977), cited in Jayawardena (1987, 334–336).
19. On the relevance of the notion of universalism to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist politics, see Ato Sekyi-Otu (2019). For a fascinating if optimistic global survey of the relationship between populist movements and socialist politics, with special comparative attention to the theoretico-political legacy of Russian Narodniks in the international Marxist and Leninist traditions, see the study of the Soviet scholar Vladimir Georgievich Khoros ([1980] 1984).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Amarasekara, G. (1980) 2014. *Anagarika Dharmapala Marxwadeeda?* [Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?]. Boralasgamuwa: Visidunu.
- Amarasekara, G. 1988. *Gananduru Madiyama Dakinemi Arunalu* [In the Heart of Darkness I See Rays of Dawn]. Maharagama: Chinthana Parshadaya.
- Amarasekara, G. 1993. *Jathika Chinthanaya saha Jathika Arthikaya* [National Ideology and National Economy]. Maharagama: Chinthana Parshadaya.
- Amarasekara, G. 2016. *Sabhyathwa Rajyaya Karaa* [Towards the Civilizational State]. Boralasgamuwa: Visidunu.
- Chatterjee, P. 1993. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Communist Party. 1977. *The Tasks of Our Party in the New Political Situation*. Colombo: Communist Party.
- de Silva, S. B. D. 1982. *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment*. London: Routledge.
- Ekers, M., S. Kipfer, and A. Loftus. 2020. 'On Articulation, Translation and Populism: Gillian Hart's Postcolonial Marxism.' *Annals of American Association of Geographers*, doi:10.1080/24694452.2020.1715198.
- Fanon, F. (1961) 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre. New York: Grove Press.
- Goonewardena, K. 2019. 'The Crisis in Sri Lanka'. *Jacobin*, 01 February: www.jacobinmag.com.
- Gunasinghe, N. 1996. 'The Open Economy and its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka.' In *Newton Gunasinghe: Selected Essays*, edited by Sasanka Perera, 183–203. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.
- Hall, S. 1979. 'The Great Moving Right Show'. *Marxism Today*, January: 14–20.
- Hart, G. 2018. 'Relational Comparison Revisited: Marxist Postcolonial Geographies in Practice.' *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (3): 371–394.
- Hart, G. 2019. 'From Authoritarian to Left Populism?' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118 (2): 309–323.
- Jayawardena, K. 1987. 'National Question and the Left Movement in Sri Lanka'. In Jayawardena (2017: 301–338).
- Jayawardena, K. 2017. *Labour, Feminism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Selected Essays*. Colombo: Sailfish.
- Kadirgamar, A. 2018. 'Northern Elections and Tamil Politics'. *Daily Mirror*, 19 February: www.dailymirror.lk.
- Khoros, V. G. (1980) 1984. *Populism: Its Past, Present and Future*. Translated by Nadezhda Burova. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Kipfer, S. 2013. 'City, Country, Hegemony: Gramsci's Spatial Historicism.' In *Gramsci: Space, Nature, Politics*, edited by Mike Ekers, Gillian Hart, Stefan Kipfer, and Alex Loftus, 83–103. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kipfer, S. 2016. 'Populism'. In *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, edited by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Conner, and A. K. Thompson, 311–317. Oakland: AK Press.
- Kipfer, S., and K. Goonewardena. 2013. 'Urban Marxism and the Post-Colonial Question: Henri Lefebvre and "Colonization".' *Historical Materialism* 21 (2): 76–116.
- Laclau, E. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E., and C. Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Sociality Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Liyanage, S. 2017. *Sabhyathva Rajyaya saha Samasamajaya* [Civilizational State and Socialist Society]. Visidunu: Nugagoda.
- Mouffe, C. 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Muttiah, W., and S. Wanasinghe. 2005. *Two Languages One Nation—One Language Two Nations: Lanka Sama Samaja Party on the State Language*. Colombo: Young Socialist Publications.
- Philips, R. 2019. 'Rajapaksa Authoritarianism and Premadasa Welfarism'. *Colombo Telegraph*, 3 November: www.colombotelegraph.com.
- Sartre, J. (1964) 2001. *Colonialism and Anticolonialism*. Translated by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams, Prefaced by Robert J. C. Young, Introduction by Azzedine Haddour. London: Routledge.
- Sekyi-Otu, A. 2019. *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*. New York: Routledge.
- Shanin, T. 1983. *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Sivanandan, A. 1990. 'Sri Lanka: A Case Study.' In *Idem Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism*, 199–250. London: Verso.
- Somasundram, J. 2019. 'An Orwellian Replay.' *The Island*, 10 January: www.island.lk.
- Sotiris, P. 2019. 'Is a "Left Populism" Possible?' *Historical Materialism* 27 (2): 3–39.
- Williams, R. 1973. *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.